

Conjunctivitis (Pink Eye)

The conjunctiva is the thin clear membrane that covers the eyelids and eyeball. The conjunctiva is easily irritated by allergies, foreign bodies, viruses and bacteria. Allergic conjunctivitis is usually seasonal (spring and fall) and produces bilateral redness and itching. A child with a foreign body in his eye will complain of a gritty sensation and pain when he blinks. Viral conjunctivitis is usually associated with an upper respiratory infection and produces irritation and a mostly clear discharge. Bacterial conjunctivitis is a secondary infection that produces thick, pus-like drainage from one or both eyes. Unless there is severe pain or abnormal vision, pink eye is not an emergency and can be handled during regular business hours. Pink eye in the newborn is not discussed below.

Allergic and viral conjunctivitis associated with redness of the white part of the eye and clear discharge can be treated at home. Use a warm, moist cotton ball to clean the child's eye from the inner aspect outward. Use a new cotton ball for each eye. A cool compress on the eye may make the child feel more comfortable. Viral conjunctivitis will likely last four to seven days. Allergic conjunctivitis may be ongoing during allergy season and may respond to an over the counter oral anti-histamine drug (diphenhydramine). If the itching is extremely bothersome then we should evaluate your child in our office.

If thick, pus-like drainage occurs, a bacterial infection may be responsible. Anti-bacterial eye drops are indicated in the treatment of bacterial conjunctivitis.

Viral or bacterial conjunctivitis is contagious and good hand washing, especially after touching the face, is recommended to prevent its spread. Towels used for the child should be washed in hot water. Tissues used for the child should be discarded at once.

Irritation of the conjunctiva caused by smoke, chlorine or dirt in the eyes can most often be handled at home. Gently rinse the child's eyes with water and wash his face. If irritation persists we should examine the child for a possible retained foreign body.

When to call our office:

If your child is under two years of age and develops thick, pus-like drainage from either or both eyes, we should examine him within 24 hours. Bacterial conjunctivitis in this age group can be associated with an ear infection. For older children please call during regular business hours to discuss treatment options with our experienced nursing staff.

If your child develops a high fever, drainage from the eye, swelling and /or redness around the eye, we should examine him the same day. There may be an infection in the soft tissues surrounding the eye.

If your child complains of severe eye pain or has changes in vision you should call us immediately.